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The Myth of Individuation in W.B Yeats's *On Baile's Strand*: A Jungian Perspective

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Abstract

On Baile's Strand, is an adroit reframing of the legendary Irish hero Cú Chulainn who despite displaying the greatest sparks of gallantry in the original legend is not entirely phenomenal in Yeats's literary work. Many critics believe Yeats recounted the saga of Cuchulain to jog Ireland's memory of the moments of intensity, when the hero's quandary resonates with the national orchestra of pandemonium in the country. Yet this essay contends, the play offers more than a national allegory. It manifests a curious combination of psychological and political criticism in its deconstruction of the individualist paradigm. Where, the sacrifice of the individual body (Cuchulain's son) in the cause of national politics is conducive to the sacrifice of the individual's ethics (Cuchulain's selfhood) to



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the authority of dictated protocols. Therefore, through the lenses of Carl Gustav Jung's Individuation Process, the present article zooms on Cuchulain's pursuit of self, while traversing upon the archetypal stages of his psych; shadow, persona and anima. The results illustrate, although in the early parts of story Cuchulain purports to satisfy Jung's theory, his progressive evolutionary line toward the last archetype (self) is ruptured with a sudden stroke of anima and hence the hero creates a myth of individuation.

Keywords: W.B Yeats; On Baile's Strand; Individuation; shadow; persona; anima/animus

1. Introduction

Ireland's nonpareil of the early 20th centuries, William Butler Yeats is an author who cultivated the national cultural ground by recuperating some of the ancient Celtic myths that were utterly blotted out. Thomas Flanagan writes, "Yeats's devotion to Ireland had, as its reverse, a detestation for urban, industrialized civilization, a civilization which fettered the imagination and denied its access to those traditional modes of feeling by which it is nourished" (48).

From early on in his career, Yeats drew heavily on myths and legends of Celtic Ireland. One particular instance is the legendary Irish figure Cú Chulainn who was celebrated by Yeats in his poems and plays from 1892 to 1939. The hero is a mortal who exhibits superhuman attributes due to his acts of valour and feats of power. Yeats recounted the saga of Cuchulain to jog Ireland's memory of the moments of intensity, when the hero's quandary resonates with the



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orchestra of pandemonium in their country. Indeed, availing of such legends, the author aspires to cherish the visions that would ignite a new faith in Ireland.

In *On Baile's Strand* (1904), Yeats portrayal of Cuchulain's prowess in the battlefield is matched with the Persian hero Rostam. Being the commander in chief in the army of Ulster, he takes an oath of fidelity to Conchubor, King of country, and is commanded by him to take up arms against an unknown youth sent by queen Aífe, his previous beloved. On the battlefield, the two combatants cross swords for what seemed an eternity, adding more and more power. After a very long and heavy bout of wrestling, Cuchulain feels frustrated. Thus, put on his guard against the blemishes which may have disfigured his fame, he stabs the youth in the heart. Finally, learning that the young man he has killed was his own son by Aífe, Cuchulain dies raging against the waves. Therefore, Cuchulain cannot complete the process of individuation to achieve his self/wholeness.

2. Discussion

2.1. Carl Gustav Jung's Individuation Process

In 1928, Jung describes Individuation Process in terms of dissociation of the unconscious figures of the psyche from consciousness. He calls the contents of the collective unconscious 'the archetypes', explaining that "They are the contents which are present in every living individual as a form of psychic equivalent to the biological force of an instinct" (qtd in Kincl 52). As



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Rudolf Kincel explicates in his “C.G. Jung’s Individuation Process”:

It was the psychopathology of psychic disturbances, which is characterized by eruption of the collective unconscious that Jung regarded as evidence for the existing archetypal forces in the psyche of every individual. The archetype was previously explained to represent the fragment of the collective psyche, which can be understood truly only when consciously experienced as a living opposite. (52)

In other words, understanding the archetype through experience is the same as what Jung called “mode of apprehension” which itself, leads to a natural process of understanding one’s personality from within. Thus, as C.G Jung mentions in his *Two Essays On Analytical Psychology*, the conscious apprehension of the unconscious archetypal contents of the psyche can be regarded as a natural process of the apprehension of “potential wholeness” (108). Indeed, if the figures of the unconscious, which are presented in the form of archetypal images, remain unrevealed and unconscious, the individual cannot become a distinct human being. The very distinction from the unconscious archetypal images encourages a further development of consciousness, resulting in self-realization. Therefore, in his next essay, “Die Beziehungen Zwischen dem Ich und den,” Jung redefined Individuation as the “coming to selfhood” or “self-realization” (171). Therein, he delineates the goal of Individuation as “nothing else than to divest the self of the false wrappings of the persona and of the suggestive power of primordial images” (172).

Compensating his/her consciousness, the unconscious components affects the ego



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consciousness of every individual. The most disturbing archetypes barging on the ego are the shadow, the anima and the animus. They express themselves “sometimes partly through symptoms, partly through actions, opinions, affects, fantasies and dreams” (Jung 174). The persona and its counterpart, the shadow, emerge during the first half of life, while the anima and animus exert influence on the individual’s consciousness in the second half of life.

In fact, the Individuation Process is not only a worthwhile but an absolutely indispensable process. Every individual who would not like to be himself, commits actions which bring him/her into disharmony- “The disharmony with himself is precisely the intolerable psychological condition that leads to various forms of psychic disturbances” (Kincel 57). Therefore, only when a person is in line with his true self, he can achieve a state of harmony in terms of psychic balance. In this regard, Jung contends that “when a man can say of his states and actions, 'As I am, so I act', he can be at one with himself” (223). Yet this stage is where Yeats’s hero, Cuchulain ultimately falters upon and thereby cannot complete his process of individuation.

2.2. Shadow

In Jungian Psychology, the course of individuation evinces a particular regularity. Its various stages are marked by archetypal symbols; and of these “the first stage leads to the experience of the “SHADOW” which symbolizes our ‘other aspect’, our ‘dark brother’, who, albeit invisibly,



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yet belongs inseparably to our totality” (Jacobi 126). Birtchnell further illustrates the shadow as “the unconscious aspect of the personality which the conscious ego does not identify in itself” (54). Indeed, since one tends to remain benighted about the least wished-for aspects of one’s personality, “the shadow is largely negative” (Crain 341).

According to Jung’s *Psychology of the Transference*, “this animal sphere of instinct, as the primitive or archaic psyche, emerges into the zone of consciousness and can no longer be repressed by fictions and illusions” (239). Therefore, being instinctive and primeval, the shadow is disposed to psychological projection, in which an acknowledged ethical anomaly in some one is rooted in an acknowledged ethical deficiency in someone else.

Put it in Jung’s frame, being a Cuchulain warrior is a really tough challenge. Since he has a deep connection with his shadow, the lethal Culann’s Hound, with whom he had his first great battle in childhood and after its assassination, the prey’s spirit enters into its conqueror and becomes his everlasting shadow. From then on, Setana renamed into the name of his slain prey, Cu-Chulainn. Jung further remarks that the “Assimilation of the shadow gives a man body, so to speak”, (77) and hence furnishes a launch pad for further individuation. We can discover Cuchulain’s fulfillment of this fact through zooming on one of his early dialogues with Conchubar, the king of Ulster. Here the king, aware of Cuchulain’s audacity, picking quarrels on the hero’s dalliance to make him swear an oath of allegiance and forcing the unaware man to kill a young warrior sent by Queen Aoife, Cuchulain’s beloved. On the other hand, Cuchulain



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gratified at his deeds which is greatly indicative of his shadow states a series of husky utterances:

[...] I, whose mere name has kept this country safe,
I, that in early days have driven out
Maeve of Cruachan and the northern pirates
[...] Must I that held you on the throne, when all
Had pulled you from it, swear obedience
As if I were some cattle-raising king? [...] Am I
So slack and idle that I need a whip
Before I serve you?

Conchubar. No, no whip, Cuchulain.
But every day my children come and say:
“This man is growing harder to endure
How can we be at safety with this man,
That nobody can buy or bid or bind?
We shall be at his mercy when you are gone.
He burns the earth as if it were a fire,
And time can never touch him. (Yeats 11-12)

Indeed, pitted against Conchubar’s desire for subservience and domesticity, the warrior considers himself able to serve the territory’s best interests without taking the oath. He wants the crowned head to grab the fact that he is conscious of the responsibility towards his compatriots and his deeds is only to unmask himself from the tame corner of civilization; a reality which represented itself in the second domain of Jung’s individuation process, the persona.



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2.3. Persona

For Carl Jung, the persona is the individual's social guise manifested to the world—"a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and on the other to conceal the true nature of the individual" (Jung 192). Nevertheless, the collapse of persona triggers the Jungian moment in the process of individuation. The moment when that excessive adherence to social signposts disintegrates. Given Jung's view that "the persona is a semblance [...] the dissolution of the persona is therefore absolutely necessary for individuation" (284). At this stage of Cuchulain's individuation process, Yeats portrays a stark contrast between Cuchulain's insouciant mien which allows him "to dance or hung, or quarrel or make love" (Yeats 11), and Conchubar's serious yearning for "a strong and settled country" (ibid 11). Yet, broken with any persona, Cuchulain is that burly figure who simply presents what he is while Conchubar is that braggart who simply pretends what he and his deserves not:

Conchubar. I am High King, my son shall be High King;
And you, for all the wildness of your blood,
And though your father came out of the sun,
Are but a little king, and weigh but light
In anything that touches government,
If put into the balance with my children.

Cuchulain. It's well that we should sneak our minds out plainly,



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For when we die we shall be spoken of
In many countries. We in our young days
Have seen the heavens like a burning cloud
Brooding upon the world, and being more
Than men can be, now that cloud's lifted up;
We should be the more truthful, Conchubar.
I do not like your children. They have no pith,
No marrow in their bones, and will lie soft
Where you and I lie hard. (Ibid 12, 13)

2.4. Anima/Animus

Having observed the reflection of the second archetype, we pursue the third stage of the hero's individuation process, the anima. In Carl Jung's school of analytical psychology, anima and animus are the two primary anthropomorphic archetypes. While anima archetype is a feminine characteristic pinpointed to the unconscious of a man, animus is a masculine personality reflected in the unconscious of a woman. The entire course of anima evolution is about the male subject creeping up on emotionality, as well as an extensive spirituality, by creating a new psychic paradigm that activates his intuitive and creative faculties. According to Jung's *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, "the encounter with the shadow is the 'apprentice-piece' in the individual's development [...] that with the anima is the 'masterpiece'" (29). Nonetheless in his *Alchemical Studies*, Jung insists that "a state of anima possession [...] must be



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prevented. The anima is thereby forced into the inner world, where she functions as the medium between the ego and the unconscious, as does the persona between the ego and the environment” (180).

In Yeats’s *On Baile’s Strand* we see the manifestation of anima, in both Cuchulain’s eulogy to his beloved Queen Aoife and his later insistence on dissuading her envoy for battle. Being afraid of the chaotic state of his country, Conchubar warns Cuchulain of surrendering to that very woman who “might run into a noose about (his) throat” (Yeats 15). Yet Cuchulain, languishing in queen’s love uttered a splendid encomium of her:

Cuchulain. [...] Ah, Conchubar, had you seen her,
With that high, laughing, turbulent head of hers
Thrown backward, and the bow-string at her ear,
Or sitting at the fire with those grave eyes
Full of good counsel as it were with wine,
Or when love ran through all the lineaments
Of her wild body – although she had no child,
None other had all beauty, queen or lover,
Or was so fitted to give birth to kings. (Ibid 14,15)

Finally, the king imposes the oath upon Cuchulain. When the young lad arrives saying he is from Aoife’s territory, the other royal personages lash out at him; Cuchulain throws himself between, since the newcomer is but one against several warriors. Although the queen’s envoy does not



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reveal his name, he shows great nobility of character. Therefore, fastening the grip of his anima, the Irish champion decided to make an alliance with the young warrior:

Cuchulain. [To Conchubar]. He has got her fierceness,
And nobody is as fierce as those pale women.
And I will keep him with me, Conchubar,
That he may set my memory upon it
When the day's fading. You will stop with us,
And we will hunt the deer and the wild bulls;
And, when we have grown weary, light our fires
Between the wood and water, or on some mountain
Where the shape-changers of the morning come. (Ibid 23)

Alternatively, over-awareness of the anima or animus could provide a premature conclusion to the individuation process- a kind of “psychological short-circuit” (Jung 268) through which at one moment the unconscious alerts the self, with the one the person’s anima identifies. It was the manifestation of this slant step that throws the combatant onto a challenging process of individuation.

In the last scene, having afraid of being beaten into second place, the king trivializes the old champion saying that “Some witch of the air has troubled Cuchulain’s mind” (Yeats 25). The hero unable to bear the load of king’s miscalculation, summons the Young Man to death. Thus, not able to set the power of anima in balance, the hero could not flow into the last archetypal



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stage (the self). Indeed, the over awareness of anima made the hero kill his son, and while swinging out of the frame of individuation, throws himself into the waves.

3. Concluding Remarks

In his “*Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*,” C.G Jung explicates the close relationship between the stages of life and the archetypal stages of personality development. In the first half of life, which is the youth period, an individual destines for the growth of a solid ego consciousness. In the second half of life, which is the middle age period, the individual’s *raison d’être* is the elaboration of ego consciousness through self-realization (Individuation). Thus, Individuation is a natural process of personality development which requires “the dialectic interplay of the spontaneously emerging self and also of conscious ego participation” (Kincel 113). For this purpose, the figures of unconscious (archetypal stages), must become conscious and “known to the ego as existing opposite qualities within the total realm of the psyche” (ibid 113). The conscious realization of the unconscious components and their incorporation into consciousness represents the process of self-realization (Individuation). In other words, conscious realization can be regarded as “a kind of approximation of conscious and unconscious” (Jung 365).

Hence, through the lenses of Carl Gustav Jung’s Individuation Process, the present article studied Cuchulain’s Individuation, focusing on the archetypal stages of his psych; shadow,



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persona and anima. The results illustrate, passing the stages of shadow and persona, the hero purported to satisfy Jung's Individuation theory in his first half of life. Yet, not able to set the power of anima in balance, the hero killed his son and could not flow into the last archetypal stage (the self). Therefore, not coming up with self-realization, Cuchulain creates a myth of Individuation.

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